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A Look at the Benefits of Writing for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Problems

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Running Head: Writing Benefits

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Abstract

The process approach to teaching writing can be a useful tool to develop important skills in emotionally disturbed/behavior disordered students. Skills such as self-exploration, self-expression, problem solving, risk taking, and interaction with others can be improved through the writing process. An enhanced self-concept is another product of this approach. This article briefly describes the process approach to teaching writing and then examines how this approach can develop these various skills and improve self-concept.

A Look at the Benefits of Writing for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Problems

For educators working with emotionally disturbed/ behavior disordered (ED/BD) students the search for materials and techniques to enhance academic and social development of their students is never ending. Almost daily, we receive mail encouraging us to purchase this or that new method, material, or technique to use in our classroom. Some attract attention, but many do not. Although many are ultimately useful with some students, these are often only new packagings of older, proven methods with good track records in the regular classroom. Special educators can and should utilize the vast research on effective instruction in regular education (Zigmond, N, Sansone, J., Miller, S. E., Donahoe, K. A., & Kohnke, R., 1986) to guide their work with learning disabled (Zigmond et al., 1986) and ED/BD (Unruh, 1985) students. The teaching of writing as a process, developed and used by "regular" educators, has much to offer special educators (Graves, 1986; Unruh, 1985).

Teaching writing as a process to ED/BD students can help develop important skills such as self-exploration, self-expression, problem solving, risk taking, and interaction with others. An improved self-concept and improved writing skills are also a product of this approach. Before explaining how the approach leads to improvement in

these various areas, let's first look at the process approach to teaching written communication.

Writing as a Process

Many teachers are not comfortable teaching writing. The reasons are varied but may include lack of preparation in the teaching of writing, too little experience and practice writing, and/or unsuccessful efforts to teach students writing skills (Haugen, Kean, & Mohan, 1981). As a result, most effort is focused on teaching the mechanics of writing which can be objectified (spelling, word usage, mechanics, and grammar), but with little pay-off. The problem with focusing only on instruction in the mechanics of writing is that it has had little impact on writing skills-- the good writers stay good and the bad ones stay bad (Elley, 1976). The focus seems to be on what kids can't do or don't know, not on what they can do or do know. Although research on the teaching of writing is limited (Graves, 1980), the potential of the mechanistic, product approach seems limited (Daniels & Zemelman, 1985; Haugen et al., 1981). Teaching writing as a process, however, has proven to have positive results in regular and special education classrooms (Daniels & Zemelman, 1985; Dehouske, 1979; Dehouske, 1982, Graves, 1986; Torrison, 1984).

The writing process can be broken down into four steps: pre-writing, composing, editing, and follow-up. Each step will be discussed briefly. For more detailed information,

the reader is encouraged to consult A Writing Project (Daniels & Zemelman, 1985), A Guide to the Role of the Teacher in the Writing Process (Haugen et al., 1981), and publications of the Wisconsin Writing Project (see note). Graves (1986) and Unruh (1985) suggest ways to use the process approach with learning disabled and ED/BD students.

Pre-writing

Whereas most teachers traditionally give little thought or time to pre-writing, it has been given top priority in the process approach. Some suggest that at least seventy-five or eighty percent of the time spent on a writing assignment should be devoted to pre-writing activities (Daniels & Zemelman, 1985; Tompkins & Friend, 1985)). Even more time may be necessary with ED/BD students (Torrison, 1984). The teacher must be ready to provide motivation and technical skills needed for the assignment as well as to stimulate students to generate their own ideas. Here the emphasis in on what the students know or can do--- not on what knowledge or skills they lack. For information on activities for ED/BD students during this phase of the writing process, see Unruh (1985).

Composing

This is when the writing is actually done, but relatively little time is spent on this step when compared to pre-writing and editing. Although this is the step least understood (Daniels & Zemelman, 1985), we do know things that

the teacher can do to help with the actual writing. These include 1) providing an environment that the student prefers when composing, 2) encouraging thinking and writing by emphasizing that the draft is for ideas, not a final product, and 3) serving as a "pump primer" to get ideas flowing.

Editing

Editing is not necessarily the correction of mechanical/technical errors. Although editing can include some of this, it should focus on one's response to the content. This includes reporting what message is conveyed to the reader and how it makes the reader feel.

Teachers or the writer usually do the editing. Peers can also effectively serve as editors. Getting ED/BD students ready for this is not a simple task. It is necessary to develop a sense of trust among the students so that they feel comfortable enough to share their writing (feelings, thoughts, interests, values, etc.) with others. One way to introduce peer editing is to have the teacher model the process for the class. Peer editing can be effective in either large or small groups. Daniels and Zemelman (1985) and Haugen, Kean, and Mohan (1981) are good resources for helpful tips on peer editing.

Follow-Up

Follow-up includes evaluating and delivering the work to its intended audience. Unfortunately, follow-up too often involves only covering the paper with red marks and assigning a grade (often a low one). If writing is to fulfill its promise as a method of communication with self and others (Graves, 1986), then written assignments require more than just a grade: the work deserves a response from the teacher. What was good? What was creative? Does the reader understand the point? Only after receiving feedback from others is the student ready to produce the final draft.

Once the final draft is ready, the teacher makes sure the assignment, in its finished form, reaches the designated audience. Now is the time to publish it in the school newspaper, put it on the bulletin board, read it in class or send/present it to the intended audience. The student's work may be done when the final draft is turned in, but the teacher's work isn't completed until the product reaches the intended audience.

Student Development Through Writing

This section will address how the writing process can be used to develop a variety of important student skills including self-expression, risk taking, interaction with others, and problem solving skills. The enhancement of self-concept will also be addressed.

Self-expression

The writing process stresses writing as communication--- communication with self and/or others. Speaking to authority figures about important issues is not easy for students or adults. Through writing many ED/BD students may find an avenue to express feelings and thoughts that could not be shared through other forms of commuication (Dehouske, 1979). Putting our thoughts and ideas on paper also helps us to organize them better so they can be conveyed more accurately. Many therapies and intervention programs for the ED/BD rely upon either self-awareness of feelings and thoughts or their appropriate, effective communication. The writing process clearly can can be used to strengthen the effectiveness of these programs.

Risk Taking

Through writing in a secure environment the ED/BD child can practice sharing his/her thoughts, ideas, and work with others. Writing has been used to promote risk taking among ED/BD adolescents (Dehouske, 1982). Traditionally the first step involves the risk of exposure to the teacher, but, as we have mentioned, there is also a risk of exposure to self--- becoming aware of and facing one's true feelings and emotions. So the first level of risk can be viewed as self-exposure. With peer editing, a new element is introduced--- exposure to peers. Also, risking self-exposure to peers, the teacher, or other adults is a frequently

difficult, if not nearly impossible, task. Through the writing process, the student can develop the confidence to share feelings, ideas, and work with others. However, if peer editing is to promote risk taking, then the teacher must take time to create a secure environment and then train and prepare students to do the job properly.

Interaction Skills

Pre-writing, peer editing, and follow up can also lead to improve interaction skills. Pre-writing activities can be structured to encourage student/student and student/teacher interaction. Editing, either by peers or by teachers, clearly requires this interaction. Evaluation can also be structured to promote interaction. Furthermore, student involvement in delivering the assignement to the intended audience can require the development of additional interaction skills, this time with individuals beyond the classroom or school.

Problem Solving

Children with learning problems (social and academic) are thought to be deficient in problem solving skills (Parrill-Burnstein, 1981) or inflexable in their application (Gerber, 1984). Problem solving skills can be improved through writing. Problem solving requires the following skills: stimuls differentiation, selective attention to important, relevant stimuli, response generation, response execution, and appropriate response to feedback

(Parrill-Burnstein, 1981). Written assignments can be developed to focus on any one or combination of these skills. Both Dahouske (1982) and Policastro (1984) have demonstrated instructional methods/techniques to develop problem solving skills through writing. Writing helps us organize our ideas and experiences and make sense of them (Graves, 1985). This organization and understanding is necessary for effective problem solving.

Self Concept

Finally, writing can also be used to enhance self-concept. Teachers have known for a long time that there is a positive relationship between student performance in school and self-concept (Quandt, 1970). Writing as a process focuses on the student's ideas and knowledge--- not on the lack of knowledge (i.e. grammar, spelling, etc.) By teaching writing as a process, the chances of having a successful experience are maximized. A finished product that one is happy with boosts self-concept. For many students this could be the first time teachers (or anyone else for that matter) are paying attention to their ideas. However, there is another equally important connection between learning to write and developing a positive self-concept. Teachers participating in the 1983 Wisconsin Writing Project have written the following about self-concept and writing:

> If a student is to build a positive self-conecpt, he must know himself--- his thoughts, fantasies, abilities, limitations, and views of the world. No

> matter how much positive feedback the rest of the world gives him, he needs to develop some positive feedback for himself. He fears what he doesn't know. The more clearly he sees himself, the greater the likelihood he can change what he doesn't like and feel good about what he does like. "Writing is a means--- perhaps the best means--- to make knowledge personal, connected, accessible to self" (Strong, 1983).
>
> (Christensen, Hamann, & Kean, 1983, p.6).

What a powerful tool the writing process can be! Christensen, et al. (1983) provide many tips and ideas for building self-esteem through writing.

Summary

Traditionally, writing has been assigned, not taught. It has been perceived as and taught as a product, not a process. Those who have taught writing as a process overwhelmingly support it (Daniels & Zemelman, 1985; Graves, 1985). In addition to producing better writers, the process approach can develop skills frequently underdeveloped in ED/BD students. These include self-exploration, self-expression, problem solving, risk taking, and interaction skills. Furthermore, one's self-concept can be strengthened through the writing process. Given this list of potential benefits, we should explore the possibility of modifying our current writing programs to reflect the process approach to teaching writing. Both students and teachers will benefit.

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Note

Materials cited in the references from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education were developed by teachers participating in the Wisconsin Writing Project. These materials and a list of other available booklets on writing produced by the Wisconsin Writing Project can be obtained by writing: Wisconsin Writing Project, 556C Teacher Education Building, 225 N. Mills Street, Madison, WI 53706.